

Traditionally, Simchat Torah is observed on the day after Shemini Atzeret, the eighth day of Sukkoth. It has been celebrated as the ninth day of the feast to mark the end of the annual Torah reading cycle and the beginning of the new Torah reading cycle. It is when the scroll is rolled back to the beginning and the last and the first verses of the Torah are read.

Because it is not a part of the biblical observance of Sukkoth, it has been our custom to observe it on the Sabbath following the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Sukkoth. So on the traditional Jewish calendar, this would be Shabbat Bereshit and we would be reading the first portion of Genesis. Next Shabbat, we will read the first and second portions of Genesis and this Shabbat we will concentrate on celebrating the goodness of G-d in sharing the great treasure of His Word with us. We have gone through our regular Siddur service and are ready to both hear the Word and to roll our scroll back to the beginning.

In a traditional synagogue, there would be three special readers who would highlight portions of the Torah as the scroll is rolled back. We will roll it back as we gather around it and then we shall read both the three traditional portions and one from the New Testament. Usually, in our shul, we select as many different languages as possible and read John 1:1-5 in as many languages as possible.

We do this as a sign that the Torah and the Gospel are a kind of reverse Babel. Instead of one people being divided into various linguistic groups, the many people who belong to various linguistic groups, are united as one people, both in the Messiah and in His Word. We are Messianic Jews and Gentiles who want to do three things.

First we want to make sure that our lives revolve around the unchanging Word of G-d, both in the Torah and in the Gospel as we spend our lives studying this marvellous document and applying it to every part of our lives. With the new reading cycle we are going to go through the Torah one more time! Next we want to remember the history of our Jewish people and rejoice in how G-d has preserved us even through the various trials and horrors which our people have experienced over the centuries. Truly, He has never left us, nor forsaken us, even as we were scattered among the nations of the world. Now we can rejoice that so many of our people are returning to Israel, after so many generations of exile.

Lastly, connected to our people's return to the Holy Land, we want to learn to be attentive as we wait for the everlasting Kingdom of our blessed Messiah to be established over all the nations and generations of mankind. So as we roll our own scroll back to the beginning, let us do four readings and we reboot our study of this amazing book.

(rolling) (Children go to Shabbat School)

Then the last portion of the Torah: Deut. 34:9-12 (chatan Torah) is read. And the first portion of the Torah: Genesis 1:1-8 (chatan Bereshit) is read. And Chazak, Chazak: Joshua 1:1-8 is read. Finally: Brit Chadashah, John 1:1-5 is read.

Now we are ready to face the coming year from a Bible centred perspective, so that His Word remains the anchor of our souls. Instead of giving you a regular sermon, I want to share three things with you to help us begin another year in the Word.

First of all, we need to be grateful that the true G-d is nothing like the strange, grotesque gods of the pagans. If He were, there would be nothing we could do about it. If He were cruel and required human sacrifice, we would have to give it to Him. If He wanted us to cut ourselves and offer our children to Him, there would be nothing we could do about it.

When I study other religions, I am fascinated and horrified that people actually served such cruel and unreliable gods who require such strange and horrible things from them. Today we can celebrate the wonder of serving the merciful G-d who is slow to anger and full of compassion. His commandments are designed to give us a high quality of life, where we discover our potential and treat each other with love and compassion.

He does not want us to exhaust ourselves, trying to find His will and always live in fear that He will punish us for our weaknesses. Our G-d is kind and wants to be our Good Shepherd who guides us into green pastures and protects us from our enemies. We will face any number of trials and heart aches as we wander through this darkening world, year by year, but our faith in G-d and our walk with the Messiah will always be a refuge so we can heal and recharge and grow in grace and love.

His commandments are not grievous and His requirements are not burdensome. How is your walk with this amazing Saviour and His incredible Word? I want to help people come to faith in our King because He is so amazing and wonderful and His Word is such an amazing description, both of how the universe was put together and where it will eventually end up. As believers we do not live in fear of an imminent nuclear holocaust or of a globally warming world which shall take vengeance on us for our mistreatment of its resources.

We are concerned with being responsible stewards who support conservation and clean energy, but we are not waiting for the world to fall apart, we are waiting for the coming kingdom. Darkness is growing around the globe and moral bankruptcy is on the rise, but our destiny is not tied to the fate of climate change and global pandemics.

We are called out of this world by our gracious King and have an eternal destiny that is marvellous beyond description. Instead of abusing us and filling us with fear, our G-d and His Word want to fulfill us and make our lives an expression of His great love and compassion, even in a world that is moving farther and farther away from the truths of the Bible.

Besides being grateful that our G-d is who He is, we can also be grateful that our faith remains relevant, even in our fast paced, ever changing world. For several centuries, the enemy has tried to undermine our faith and cause people to doubt the teachings of the Bible. It is falsely claimed that the message of the Bible is now irrelevant and has little to say to our sophisticated, techno driven world.

Values have changed and what was once unacceptable is now the norm and we are told to accept everyone and let them believe whatever they want, because different religions are supposedly just different versions of the same truth. But our modern society has opened a moral Pandora's box. Moral and sexual brokenness are on the rise, as are drug abuse and the greedy pursuit of wealth. The world is still full of poor, oppressed people and the nations are all trying to get the best deal for a select elite group and our cultural concept of what is right and wrong is making this world a darkening place.

But in the midst of all of this, our faith remains relevant. It can heal the brokenhearted and restore people who have been ravaged by a carnal lifestyle. It can bring peace where there was once strife and the message we have to offer the world is spiritual freedom and moral wholeness in our lost and dying world.

We have spent the last year studying the Torah and we are now going to embark on another year of study, so that our faith is firmly established on the rock and that we remain good, fruitful soil.

When our people came home from Babylon, we became a nation of Bible scholars who wanted to know G-d and explore the wonders of His Word. We knew that the Messiah was coming soon and we wanted to be ready for Him. There were many misunderstandings and what was originally designed to be a commentary on the Torah, became a collection of traditions and obligations that blinded our people when the Messiah showed up at the appointed time. He fulfilled His destiny, died and rose from the dead and will return according to the promises in G-d's Word.

We follow a Torah reading guide which breaks up this amazing book into 54 portions and allows for special festival readings as the seasons turn and the whatever's of life come wandering through our lives. We are encouraged to be Torah focused, so that we can see the world through the eyes of faith and not be carried away by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

I have been studying the Torah as a spiritual leader for 25 years and I also studied it as a young believer who came to faith nearly 50 years ago. Studying His Word is our main business and applying its truths is our main calling. We have put last year behind us and have once again dealt with all and any spiritual baggage we acquired along the way.

Even if we did not always get it right, we have another year to work on walking with our king and seeing His promises become a reality in our lives. We want to remain pilgrims and strangers who are only passing through this life on our way home to our Father's House in Glory. We are citizens of the coming kingdom, patiently waiting for this wonderful reality to break forth and bring healing and redemption to our lost and dying world.

We serve a G-d who is wonderful and amazing beyond our ability to describe how amazing He is. We live as beacons of light in a darkening world and want to see people set free from darkness and sin. The pace of change is still accelerating in our sophisticated world and people are continuing to reject G-d and the wonder of His Word. But as we pass through, we want to be students of His Word who see the truth and understand the ultimate meaning of life. Faith and obedience are really all that life should be about as we see the coming kingdom drawing near.

Join us for one more year through the Torah, as we let its treasures fill our hearts and lives with the wonder of the Messiah's love. We will encounter opposition, but even though we are shaken, we will not crumble as we live under the provision and protection of our Saviour. Whatever will come, will come, but as long as we are rooted in His Word and are studying its truths, the bumpy straight and narrow will continue to be the only safe place in the turbulence of this life. Full speed ahead, campers. When we are armed with the Torah, nothing can stop us in the purposes of G-d.